Research Article

Conceptualizing Meaningful Experiences

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Marcel Bastiaansen[1] and Mat D. Duerden[2]

[1]Breda University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
[2]Brigham Young University, USA

Abstract

Despite increased interest in experience and experience design in hospitality, tourism, and leisure, the field remains emergent. For experience design to mature in research and practice, clear consensus conceptualization of key constructs, like memorable, meaningful, and transformative experiences, is needed. While existing research identifies emotions as the key to memorable experiences, more conceptual work is needed to understand the unique impact and process behind meaningful experiences. This paper proposes an expanded conceptualization of the impact and process associated with meaningful experiences. We suggest that as individuals reflect on existing experiential (i.e., autobiographical) memories, they can extract insight from those memories. If any of the extracted insights connect with core sources of meaning, then the individuals perceive their experience as meaningful. Suggestions for potential strategies to design for meaningful experiences are also shared.

Keywords

tourism experience, experience impact, experience type framework, meaning in life, meaningful experience, experience design

Introduction

Individuals experience life as a stream of consciousness, which they partition into experiential segments using existing mental models (Bastiaansen et al., 2019). These experiential segments serve as the raw material from which meaning in life is constructed. Research supports the connection between meaning in life and well-being (Steger, 2012, 2017). Individuals who report having a sense of meaning also report higher levels of life satisfaction, positive self-image, happiness, psychological maturity, personal growth, and many other positive outcomes. While meaning derives from experiences, however, not all experiences produce meaning. Martela and Steger (2016) note that extracting meaning from experience requires "rising above the merely passive experiencing, to a reflective level that allows one to examine one's life as a whole, making sense of it, infusing direction into it, and finding value in it" (p. 538).

Therefore, questions exist regarding what types of experiences are more likely to produce intentional reflection and meaning making. While there is a robust body of literature that highlights leisure (e.g., Bastiaansen, 2022) and tourism (e.g., Câmara et al., 2023; Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022) as contexts well positioned for the staging of meaningful experiences, we feel that these fields lack comprehensive, psychologically grounded conceptualizations of meaningfulness. Such a construct would promote an understanding of what does—and what does not—constitute a meaningful leisure, tourism, or hospitality experience. The present paper addresses this gap. In addition, we aim to provide tentative, yet practical strategies for designing experiences to help the industry make its experiential offerings more meaningful.

Duerden and colleagues' (2018) experience-type framework proposes a hierarchical structure of ordinary and extraordinary experiences and the impact of each type. It suggests

Corresponding Author:
Mat D. Duerden, Professor, Brigham Young University, w417 TNRB, Provo, UT 84602-0002, USA.
E-mail: duerden@byu.edu

that extraordinary (i.e., memorable, meaningful, and transformative) experiences are characterized by core impacts of emotion, insight, and change, and that each ascending type exhibits the impact(s) of the preceding type(s). The framework's hierarchical structure has received subsequent empirical support (Duerden et al., 2023). The work of Bastiaansen et al. (2019) further conceptualizes the role of emotions in memorable experiences. Neither of these pieces of research fully articulates the process whereby individuals draw meaning from their experiences. Further conceptual development is needed to understand how experiences produce meaning, and if and how meaningful experiences can be intentionally designed. Therefore, the first part of the present paper consists of conceptual research (Xin et al., 2013) in which we seek to more clearly define and delineate the concept of meaningful experiences, and to address the antecedents of such experiences.

The second part of the paper presents an exploration into experience design strategies aligned with this conceptual model. Drawing upon the different sources of meaning identified in the conceptual research part of the paper, we identify design strategies aimed at promoting processes leading to the extraction of meaning from the experience. We also call for an empirical validation of the proposed strategies.

In brief, this paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How does meaning emerge, or how is it extracted from experiences?
2. How can experiences be intentionally designed to facilitate this process?

Meaning in Life

Meaning is a complex and multifaceted concept that has long been studied by psychologists, philosophers, and religious scholars. Meaning has been defined in various ways and by different disciplines, ranging from linguistic (semantic) meaning (Larson & Segal, 1995) to more philosophically oriented definitions of existentialist meaning (Frankl, 1946), or anthropologically inspired sociocultural meaning definitions (Durkheim & Swain, 1916).

Aspects of meaning. Tracking the word "meaning" back to its etymological roots, meaning refers to the German notion of *meinen*, connoting to "hold in mind" (Klinger, 2012). This definition suggests that meaning is intrinsically related to the human capacity to develop conceptual representations and reflect on them. In essence, the processes of reflection and interpretation are at the core of meaning-making (Martela & Steger, 2016; Palacios et al., 2021). In this paper, we adhere to the terminology used by Martela and Steger, who define the three aspects of meaning as being coherence, purpose, and significance.

Coherence refers to a more cognitively defined component of meaning-making, which consists of making sense of one's experiences in life. This component is conceptually in line with the propositions that life narratives, or life stories, are important for meaning in life (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996). Purpose relates to the motivational aspects of meaning and is thought to be the most prevalent aspect of meaning in life—to the extent that some authors even equate purpose with meaning in life (George & Park, 2013). Purpose refers specifically to having a sense of direction, having short-term and long-term goals in life, and having positive valence or enthusiasm regarding the future (George & Park, 2013). Significance is the third aspect of meaning in life in the sense of the worthwhileness of life or life's inherent value, and revolves around concepts of self-esteem (Sullivan et al., 2013), existential mattering (George & Park, 2014), and whether a person has a life worth living (Wolf, 2012).

Sources of meaning. The notions of coherence, purpose, and significance add up to a well-defined, domain-general conceptualization of meaning in life. At the same time, for the present purpose of connecting meaning in life to leisure, tourism, and hospitality experiences, it is also useful, in our view, to distinguish between different sources of meaning in life, which are conceptualized at a lower level of abstraction and therefore bear a closer reference to the types of experiential settings that people encounter in everyday life (see also Schnell [2009] for a similar, hierarchical deconstruction of meaning in life into increasingly more abstract levels).

It is not our intention to give a detailed review of the relevant psychology literature on the sources of meaning in life, as excellent and comprehensive reviews and conceptual writings are available elsewhere. Rather, we rely on the most influential works of the past 2 decades on meaning in life (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Câmara et al., 2023; Emmons, 2003; Martela & Steger, 2016; Vos, 2018; Wolf, 2012). Although different authors use different terminology and have slightly divergent views on what constitute sources of meaning in life, there is considerable conceptual consistency across the different works. To grasp this consensus, we identify four sources of meaning in life that are quite consistently distinguished, despite differences in labelling and terminology: social connection, goal fulfillment, growth, and contribution. Below, we develop these sources of meaning in some detail; Table 1 presents an overview of how our terminology maps onto the different labels that have been used in different publications.

Social connection is an important source of meaning, as it represents a fundamental and pervasive human need (O'Donnell et al., 2014). Having strong relationships with family, friends, and loved ones provides a sense of belonging and support, feeding into the meaning aspects of coherence and significance. Having shared experiences (Shahvali et al., 2021), sharing individually lived experiences (Fox et al., 2021), or socially constructing meaning through shared narratives at the level of close relatives (Delafield-Butt, 2018) or even communities (Stapleton & Wilson, 2017) are all

Table 1. Overview of Different Identification and Labeling of Sources of Meaning by Various Authors.

Source of Meaning	Social Connection	Goals & Fulfillments	Contribution	Growth	Other
Baumeister and Vohs (2002): Needs for Meaning		Purpose	Values, Sense of efficacy	Self-worth	
Câmara (2023): Meaningful Experience Dimensions	Relational dimension	Well-being dimension	Behavioral dimension	Personal dimension	Emotional dimension
Emmons (2003): Taxonomy of Life Meaning	Relationships/ Intimacy	Achievement/ work	Self-transcendence/ Generativity	Personal strivings	Religion/Spirituality
Wolf (2012): Views on Meaningfulness of Life		Fulfillment view	Larger-than-oneself-view		
Vos (2018): Sources of Meaning	Social connections	Personal goals	Work and accomplishments	Work and accomplishments	Experiences of Transcendence; suffering and adversity
Schnell (2009): Sources of Meaning Dimensions	Well-being and relatedness	Self-actualization	Horizontal self-transcendence	Self-actualization	Vertical self-transcendence; order

examples of how sharing and establishing social connection with relevant others creates meaning. Shared experiences often lead to the development of shared meaning and result in what Turner (1995) described as communitas, or sense of community. Turner proposed that communitas was most likely to emerge in shared rituals and traditions that existed in liminal spaces outside of everyday contexts, like work and home life. Due to the liminal nature of most tourism and leisure experiences, communitas that arises from such shared experiences has received significant attention from scholars studying leisure and tourism (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Higgins & Hamilton, 2020).

Connected to the more abstract notion of purpose, as defined by Martela and Steger (2016), we see the fulfillment of both short-term and long-term goals, and the fulfillment of ambitions, wishes, or desires as more concrete sources or domains of meaning in life. Reaching pre-set goals is intrinsically rewarding, leading to positive affect and a clear sense of meaning in life (King et al., 2006). While some authors equate goal pursuit with meaning in life (Emmons, 2003), others distinguish between goals and fulfillment, arguing that the objective pursuit of goals gives purpose and direction to one's life, but that the actual subjective experience of fulfillment is what provides a sense of meaning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

A third and well-established source of meaning is the sense of contribution, or the feeling of making a difference in the world. As such, this source of meaning in life is closely connected to the positive psychology concept of *eudaimonia* (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2002). A fourth and final source of meaning in life is growth, or the striving to become a better person and to learn new things. Dating back to the original notion of self-actualization put forward by Maslow (1962), personal growth, including related concepts such as curiosity (Kashdan & Steger, 2007), identity development (O'Donnell et al., 2014), and growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), has consistently been identified as providing a sense of meaning in life. Note that although growth is sometimes confounded with goal setting and goal fulfillment, there is a wide variety of goals that do not necessarily entail any personal growth.

In summary, then, we identify connection, goals and fulfillment, contribution, and growth as sources of meaning in life. These elements provide us with a situated and grounded source base for meaning in life. In our view, also drawing upon the notion of hierarchies of meaning in life proposed by Schnell (2009), each of these lower-level, experientially grounded sources of meaning feeds to a smaller or larger extent into the three aspects of meaning in life as defined by Martela and Steger (2016); see Figure 1. Note that the relationship between sources and aspects of meaning is not necessarily a linear one in the sense that not all sources contribute equally to all aspects. For instance, growth and contribution are likely to feed more into significance, whereas goals and fulfillment feed more into purpose. As said, the main reason for distinguishing between higher level aspects and somewhat more concrete sources is that the concrete sources are more grounded in specific experiential contexts and therefore allow for building connections between lived experiences, and meaning-making processes.

The Pathway From Experiences to Meaning

Bastiaansen et al. (2019) articulated the process whereby individuals activate existing mental models to segment their stream of consciousness into experiential episodes. While most of these episodes are perceived as ordinary and therefore have no long-term impacts on individuals' lives, a smaller subset of experiences produces specific impacts. Research suggests that the most immediate impact of such extraordinary experiences is memorability (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Duerden et al., 2018). Memories of experiences that accrue over time become part of an individual's autobiographical episodic memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Nelson & Fivush, 2004, 2020). However, it is

important to distinguish between the mere remembering of an experience and the memorability of it; while an experience may be remembered by an individual, the experience only becomes truly memorable when it is accompanied by strong emotions (Duerden et al., 2018). A variety of factors may contribute to an experience producing emotion in an individual, including novelty (Mitas & Bastiaansen, 2018). Crucially, then, in addition to a *process* (remembering the experience), a certain *experiential quality* (strong emotions) is required for an experience to become memorable.

In a similar vein, the memorability of an experience is necessary but not sufficient for meaning to be extracted from the experience. A memorable experience is simply remembered and associated with strong emotions. By contrast, reflection involves more intentional cognitive unpacking of an experience (Boud et al., 1985), which often leads to the articulation of lessons and insights. Lessons are narrowly focused on specific actions that should take place in specific settings (e.g., you should turn off the light when you leave the room) whereas insights tend to apply more broadly and be more self-relevant (McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2003). Insights are more directly associated with meaning-making than lessons are (Thorne et al., 2004). We draw upon Palacios and colleagues' (2021) conceptualization of reflection as "a process of meaning-making from experience over time" (p. 612). Reflection can occur both during an experience (i.e., reflection-in-action) and after an experience (i.e., reflection-on-action; Palacios et al., 2021).

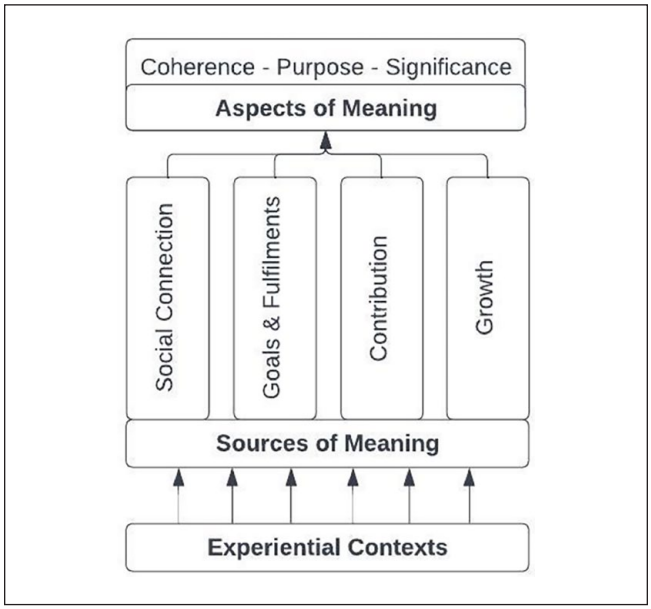

Figure 1. Aspects and Sources of Meaning.

Reflection, whether during or after an experience, allows individuals to remember memories of the experience and extract insights from those memories (Thorne et al., 2004). If individuals connect these insights to sources of meaning, they perceive the experience the insights are associated with as meaningful. This process is often referred to as autobiographical reasoning (Singer & Bluck, 2001). For example, a parent may reflect on their family vacation after returning home and realize the experience increased the family's sense of connection. This reflective insight linking the family vacation to increased family relationship quality—an example of social connection (i.e., a source of meaning)—would lead the parent to perceive the family vacation as meaningful.

In sum, for a memorable experience to become meaningful, it requires a process (reflection) and an experiential quality (the reflection leading to insights that are connected to one or several sources of meaning). Again, it follows that meaningful experiences emerge from a larger pool of memorable experiences. Progressing further through the hierarchy of extraordinary experiences (see Figure 2), a similar distinction exists between process and quality in the shift from meaningful experiences to transformative experiences. In this shift, individuals integrate new and meaningful insights into their autobiographical memory (Fivush, 2011) or even into their identity narrative (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This experiential quality of their experience would lead individuals to long-lasting, sustainable transformation. The entire set of processes and qualities that constitute the hierarchy of extraordinary experiences is summarized in Table 2. However, note that it is not our intention to focus on transformative experiences, we save that topic for a future paper.

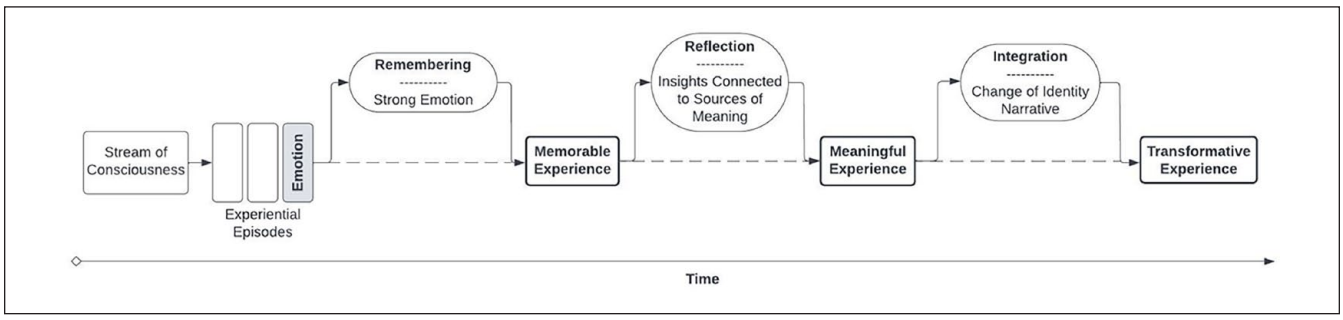

Figure 2. Temporal Hierarchy of Extraordinary Experiences.

Table 2. Processes and Experiential Qualities in the Hierarchy of Extraordinary Experiences.

Experience Type =	Process +	Experiential Quality
Memorable	Remembering	Strong emotion
Meaningful	Reflection	Insights connected to sources of meaning
Transformative	Integration	Change in identity narrative or life narrative

Figure 2 outlines the temporal, dynamic processes whereby individuals may come to perceive experiences as memorable, meaningful, or transformative. Emotions elicited by a particular experiential episode cause individuals to perceive the experience as memorable. If individuals reflect on the memory of the experiential episode, they may draw insights from that memory, and if they connect those insights to sources of meaning, then the episode in question becomes perceived as meaningful. If individuals integrate the meaningful insight into the way they think, act, or perceive themselves, then they consider the instigating experiential episode to be transformative. Thus, remembering (triggered by strong emotions), reflection (resulting in insights related to sources of meaning), and integration (resulting in updating an identity narrative) are the key cognitive processes associated with memorable, meaningful, and transformative experiences.

While reflection is necessary for meaningful experiences, it is not sufficient. Meaningfulness arises when the insight resulting from reflection is linked to a specific source of meaning. Interestingly, research suggests that reflection does not occur regularly for most people. Gelter (2003) proposed that:

> [The] conscious capability to reflect appears not to be an evolutionary old feature and genetically determined capability . . . but rather a historically recent learned feature, which could explain why reflection has not yet become a natural everyday activity in our life. (p. 342)

If this is true—and the literature the pedagogical design of reflection in education (e.g., McLeod et al., 2015) suggests it is—it seems reasonable to assume that conscious reflection is the exception rather than the norm for most people. This conclusion may also mean that many experiential episodes do not result in meaningful experiences—not because the episodes lack some essential characteristics, but because the individuals participating in them fail to intentionally reflect.

It should also be noted that a different degree of intentionality is associated with the key impacts and processes of meaningful and transformative experiences than is associated with memorable experiences. The process whereby emotions felt during an experience lead to memory production is a spontaneous cognitive process. However, reflecting on these memories sufficiently to extract insights from them, especially insights connected to sources of meaning, requires conscious action.

Designing for Meaningful Experiences

The established connection between meaning and well-being (Steger, 2012, 2017) lends support to the importance of designing meaningful experiences. While literature from a variety of fields including management (Allan et al., 2019), counseling (Sackett et al., 2012), education (Mardi, 2019), healthcare (Goodwin, 2020), and leisure and tourism (Bastiaansen, 2022; Câmara et al., 2023; Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022) address the topic of meaningful experiences, the need for guidance regarding their design still exists.

Câmara et al. (2023) note in their treatment of meaningful tourism experiences that "a meaningful experience goes beyond the unique idea of an emotional outcome, potentially predisposing the individual to self-reflection" (p. 4), which aligns with the conceptualization and process articulated in this paper. Câmara et al. (2023) further suggest that "a lack of understanding of what makes a tourist experience meaningful persists due to the intertwined use of similar constructs" (p. 4). While experiences that come to be seen as meaningful or even transformative can spontaneously occur (Kirillova et al., 2017), strategies can be enacted to increase the likelihood of gaining insights from these experiences. For example, Chirakranont and Sakdiyakorn (2022) highlight the importance of staging and co-creation in the design of meaningful experiences. In this section, we offer both general design strategies and strategies targeting specific sources of meaning (see Table 3). Experience design best practice suggests attending to all three phases of an experience (i.e., before, during, and after), which we incorporate into our discussion of strategies as well (Duerden et al., 2015; Rossman & Duerden, 2019). That said, in this paper we do not argue that a specific number or constellation of strategies is needed to reach a meaningful experience threshold. While this is a worthwhile question, answering it requires additional empirical work. We hope this paper can aid in the design of future studies to identify which strategies are most effective at designing experiences from which meaningful insights emerge.

Reflection

Experience designers intentionally consider how to both evoke and support reflection throughout an experience. Before the experience begins, designers should consider ways to invite participants to "preflect" on the experience they are

Table 3. Targeted Strategies for Designing Meaningful Experiences.

General Strategies			
	Before Experience	During Experience	After Experience
Reflection	Preflection	In-the-moment- savoring	Reflective storytelling
Co-Creation	Co-design	Co-actualize	Co-design
Source-Specific Strategies			
	Before Experience	During Experience	After Experience
Social Connection	Shared anticipation	Shared savoring; joint experience	Shared-narrative construction
Goals and Fulfillment	Value-aligned priming cues and mastery-goal formation	Goal-related feedback, situational factors, goal sequencing	Goal feedback, value connection, storytelling and sharing
Contribution	Value-informed interpretation Materials	Social development model strategies	Contribution narratives
Growth	Self-efficacy; intake assessment	Flow states; self-efficacy; task competence development	Self-evaluation/assessment

about to have (Brand et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2022). Brand et al. (2016) defines preflection as "reflection-before-action, described as thinking through intentions before one proceeds or anticipatory reflection" (p. 2). While preflection has connections to mindfulness, it is generally considered to be more directed towards specific thoughts, goals, and intentions regarding a forthcoming experience, as opposed to more global mindfulness of what's happening in the moment. Preflection activities can include pictures related to the upcoming experience, guided discussions, goal-setting, or other pre-experience planning exercises (Ellis et al., 2022). Research has shown that preflection can help participants think intentionally about relevant attitudes and knowledge they have related to an upcoming experience (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Preflection can also help emotionally prime participants before an experience (Brand et al., 2016), which may increase the likelihood of the experience itself being perceived as memorable.

Research has additionally shown that it may be necessary for participants to have a prerequisite level of knowledge about an experience before participating in order for them to extract the most meaning from the experience (Duerden & Witt, 2010). The potential design pitfall in reflection is the over-scheduling of participants in experience so that reflective opportunities become nonexistent; while the experience may elicit emotion and produce memories, participants may not have time during the experience to reflect on what is happening, and the memories made during the experience will not be strong enough to garner further reflective attention after the experience.

Reflection during the experience can also be thought of as savoring. Savoring is defined as "the self-regulation of positive feelings . . . by attending to positive experiences from the past, present, and future" (Bryant et al., 2011, p. 108). Savoring processes are seen as central to the transformation of experiential stimuli into emotions (Bryant et al., 2011) and thereby to the creation of memories. Savoring requires time and conscious thought, and certain individuals may be more predisposed to savoring than others (Bryant, 2021).

Reflection that occurs after an experience is the most incorporated type of reflection in designed experience. This type of reflection can include post-experience surveys, discussion groups, reflective journaling, and other activities in which participants mentally reengage with their experience. Research suggests that post-experience reflection is connected to learning transfer (Leberman & Martin, 2004) and longer-term maintenance of experience outcomes (Duerden et al., 2012).

Co-Creation

Experiences are, by their inherent nature, a co-created phenomenon; an experience only occurs when an individual directs his or her attention toward something else (Duerden et al., 2015). For our purposes, we define co-creation as the interaction between a participant in an experience and the experiencescape designed and staged by the experience provider (Rossman & Duerden, 2019). A substantial body of theory and research suggests that intentionally promoting opportunities for co-creation is a core strategy for designing extraordinary experiences (Jaakkola et al., 2015).

We also propose that co-creation exists on a continuum from low to high, representing the degree to which participants may play an active role in an experience. For example, a traditional theater experience would be an example of low co-creation, as participants are primarily passive audience members. However, an immersive theater experience actively engages participants as actors in the unfolding narrative. Theoretically, increased co-creation can be linked to higher levels of autonomy because it usually presents participants with more choices regarding how they participate in an experience. Greater autonomy, one of the three basic psychological needs as articulated in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001), should lead to increased intrinsic

motivation to engage in the experience in question. Along these same lines, Hassenzahl et al. (2013) suggest a connection between psychological need-fulfillment and meaningful experiences. We further draw upon Lacanienta and Duerden's (2019) conceptualization of specific types of co-creation that can occur before, during, and after an experience—namely, co-design, co-actualization, and co-curation.

Co-design includes an opportunity for participants to play a role in the design of an experience in which they plan to engage. While many examples exist of experiences in which participants can make choices to customize their experience—such as a cruise—co-design efforts could also extend beyond customization decisions. For example, co-design has been used as an approach in mental-health services, where clients and professionals come together to both understand each other and then collaboratively design treatment plans (Tindall et al., 2021). Such co-design approaches appear to be becoming more incorporated in efforts to design transformative travel experiences where the coming to understand the needs of the traveler serves as a starting point for designing the travel experience (e.g., www.transformational.travel). Experience designers who want to engage in co-design must commit to understanding the needs of their potential participants, taking the time to talk to participants and understand their needs, and then working with them collaboratively to design potential solutions.

Co-actualization, or co-creation during the participation phase, involves creating opportunities for participants to play an active role in the unfolding experience. While the rise of the experience economy increased awareness of the personal and economical importance of experiences, too many experience offerings remain at passive entertainment levels. Scholars have called for experience economy proponents to move beyond basic experience economy to provide more meaningful and transformative experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017). Further emphasizing this point, these authors state "that in the current consumptive environment, it is no longer sufficient to stage pleasurable consumer experiences. Although satisfying, such experiences are not necessarily fulfilling" (Kirillova et al., 2017, p. 645). This improvement of experiences could take the form of creating more opportunities for participants to provide feedback about their experience during—rather than only after—the experience, both to promote their own voice and to help the provider identify ways to continually improve the experience while it is still happening. Another option would be to provide participants with opportunities to take on leadership and teaching roles as part of the experience.

After an experience ends and participants return to their regular life routines, it can be difficult for them to reflect on their experiences because of the attention demands of everyday life. Providers can intentionally design opportunities for co-curation, or post-experience structured reflection, to help participants actively curate and reflect on the memories from their experience. These opportunities could take the form of social media engagements, online discussion forums, or after-experience meet-ups—either in person or virtually—to allow people to share and discuss memories. These efforts could be thought of as ways to scaffold participants' post-experience storytelling. Providers could also give participants access to artifacts from their experience (e.g., photos, videos, memorabilia) to assist them in their storytelling efforts. In a creative example of this effort, researchers considered innovative approaches in helping seniors organize and share mementos to more easily tell stories from their lives (Li et al., 2022). Providers must recognize that their responsibility to their participants should extend beyond the actual experience.

Social Connection

As discussed before, social connection is one of the most prevalent sources of meaning in life. It follows that incorporating design elements that promote shared experience (either before, during, or after the experience) allows for more reflection on social connection. Thus, when designing experiences based on social connection as a source of meaning, it is important to design both for the sharedness of the experience and for the (shared) reflection on the experience.

Regarding leisure and tourism experiences, the anticipation phase has long been identified as an important component (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966). Most previous research has focused on the individual psychological processes related to anticipating a tourism experience, such as mindfulness (Taylor & Norman, 2019) or the complexity of information processing (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). However, there is little to no empirical work addressing the importance of shared anticipation when designing the tourism or leisure experience. Incorporating design strategies that promote such shared anticipation—such as explicitly deliberating the pros and cons of the different choices—would increase the sharedness of the anticipation. Additionally, having people reflect on (the sharedness of) the anticipatory process—for instance by having them build a joint narrative of how well the decision-making process went and how the sharedness of it influenced the quality of the outcome—is likely to make this phase of the experience more meaningful to them. However, empirical work is needed to validate such an approach.

Melton (2017) has differentiated between joint activities, where the degree of social interaction is high, and parallel activities, where social interaction occurs but in low amounts. Joint leisure and tourism experiences have long been shown to have positive effects on relationships (Durko & Petrick, 2013; Mitas et al., 2023) and on families (Melton, 2017) in comparison to parallel experiences. Having people actively reflect on the joint nature of the experience as it unfolds over time, and on how that connectedness contributes to the quality of the experience, is a design strategy that may promote

the notion of social connection during the experience. It has been shown that, on an individual basis, such in-the-moment reflection, or savoring, leads to participants more positively evaluating the experience afterward (e.g., Colombo et al., 2024). However, specific literature is currently lacking regarding the influence that joint, in-the-moment savoring has on the quality and meaningfulness of the experience.

The period after an experience concludes is perhaps the key period that determines whether a memorable experience evolves into a meaningful one. As noted, this type of experience requires further reflection, and storytelling may be one of the most effective reflection processes to promote insight construction (Alterio & McDrury, 2003; McCall et al., 2019). Shared experiences can serve as especially fertile ground for co-created narratives. Shared experiences offer participants access to co-authors who they can create stories with, informed listeners who can provide feedback on their stories, and a ready audience who will listen to, understand, and collaboratively extract meaning from shared stories (Duerden et al., 2012; Taniguchi et al., 2005).

Goal Fulfillment

Locke and Latham (2019) suggest that "life is a conditional process; it requires action that sustains survival. If no action is taken or the wrong actions are taken, the organism does not survive," and, therefore, "goal-directed choice and action are at the core of human motivation" (p. 101). Locke and Latham's (1990) goal-setting theory highlights the central role goals and their fulfillment play in motivation and performance.

According to the theory of goal setting, the most effective goals are specific and difficult, and their effectiveness is moderated by feedback, commitment, ability, and situational factors (Locke & Latham, 2019). When these moderators are considered and the goal difficulty is controlled, it does not appear to matter whether goals are assigned or whether they are participative (i.e., self-articulated; Locke & Latham, 2019). The sequencing and type of goals also matter. In many cases, goals focused on growth and learning are more effective than performance goals (Seijts & Latham, 2005). The same finding stems from the research on goal-orientation theory—namely, that individuals who set goals that are focused on mastery over performance engage more purposefully and productively in the targeted tasks (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). Knowledge is a prerequisite for performance goals, or else these goals can induce anxiety rather than motivation. Accordingly, learning goals should precede performance goals (Seijts & Latham, 2005). Ultimately, however, the psychological benefit of goals is realized only so far as progress is made toward the stated goal.

Research has emerged across a variety of fields over the last 3 decades that focuses on the impact on behavior of priming unconscious processes (Weingarten et al., 2016). Priming involves any effort to subconsciously influence behavior toward goal fulfillment, and includes visual, auditory, and social cues (Aarts et al., 2008; Papies, 2016; Weingarten et al., 2016). Priming research has shown that visuals of healthy food and smaller serving sizes can influence healthy eating behavior (Buckland et al., 2018) and that reading words (Weingarten et al., 2016) associated with the targeted goal can both be effective priming strategies. A meta-analysis of priming research found that a key moderator of priming cue impact was the degree to which the cue and the targeted behavior aligned with individuals' values (Weingarten et al., 2016).

Best practices of priming, drawn from health behavior research, appear to fall into five categories, according to Papies (2016, p. 416). They:

> 1) target individuals who value primed goals, 2) tap into the right reasons [value aligned], 3) use effective cues [positive cues more effective than negative], 4) attract attention at the right time [early on in an experience the better], [and] 5) ensure that the . . . goal is possible.

These best practices appear to have generalizable applicability to other contexts and goal targets.

For experience-design purposes, goal fulfillment appears to be an effective source of meaning to target. The nature and timing of goal setting and pursuit are important considerations when designing experiences. Before an experience begins, attempts should be made to make sure that participants have opportunities to set or commit to goals that matter to them, and that align with their values. Also, priming cues—both visual and social—can increase the impact of the goals during the participation phase. During the experience, providing participants with feedback about their efforts to pursue their goals, along with continued priming cues, is important. As participants' abilities increase, performance goals may be appropriate; however, in general, mastery-focused goals appear to be more effective. After an experience concludes, participants need opportunities to receive summative feedback about their performance, and they need opportunities to craft and share stories about the growth they experienced.

Contribution

As a reminder, "contribution" as a source of meaning focuses on people's sense of contributing to something meaningful and larger than themselves. They need assurance that their involvement and efforts have brought unique, additional value outside themselves. While the role of personal values has received attention in the tourism literature (e.g., Li & Cai, 2012), less attention has been given to using participants' personal values to design experiences. A unique example of this approach, as applied to the before-experience

phase, was employed by Ballantyne et al. (2023). In their research, they used participant interviews and Schwartz's (2012) personal values model to create unique interpretation materials for four different value-based profiles. Research participants were asked to review the interpretation material based upon their own predetermined values profiles before visiting a free-choice learning exhibit. Follow-up research showed that this simple, value-based intervention significantly increased participants' post-experience environmental behavior when compared to a control group.

Based on this study, providers should consider how they can help frame participants' experiences in ways that align with participants' values. Too often the design of experiences is influenced by the designers' values without taking into consideration those of all participants (Ballantyne et al., 2021). Experiences that are designed for the choir, so to speak, make it easy for those who have a similar value and motivation profile as the designer to feel a sense of contribution from their participation, but harder for those who do not. Ballantyne and colleagues' (2021) work to develop a values interpretation matrix is an excellent example of studying participants' values in order to create a process to guide the design of free choice learning experiences that intentionally address a range of value profiles. They first had participants complete a personal values measure (Lee et al., 2019), and then they held focus groups with respondents representing the four value profiles assessed by the measure. The findings from this effort led to the creation of the matrix which both explained each group's priority values, as well as ways to account for each of them in the design of experiences, thereby making it easier for a more diverse group of participants to find a way to engage with and contribute to the experience in ways that aligned with their values.

Regarding during-experience contribution, we have drawn upon insights from the social development model (Hawkins & Weis, 1985), which suggests that when individuals perceive that an experience will provide them with opportunities for involvement, then they need to have the requisite skills to engage in the opportunity and receive positive feedback for their involvement. When this occurs, the individuals feel connected to the social group and to the norms of the social group that facilitated their experience. From an experience design perspective, this theory suggests that participants need opportunities to engage in the experience (co-actualization), the necessary skills to engage, and positive feedback for their involvement.

After an experience occurs, participants may desire assistance connecting their experience to some larger contribution narrative. One way to facilitate such connections is through the providing organization. If the organization communicates to the participants that it is connected to external causes and other organizations that align with participants' own values, it can become easier for participants to articulate how their own participation is part of a larger story.

Growth

Growth relates to striving to become a better person and learn new things, and has been identified as an important source of meaning in life. It follows that, in designing for meaningful experiences, providers can seek to optimize the chances that participants experience meaningful growth by setting specific, achievable goals that are aligned with participants' values (Locke & Latham, 2019). In addition, having participants reflect on growth before, during, and after an experience promotes favorable conditions for them to perceive the experience as meaningful. Drawing on the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1999)—or the belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals—one strategy for inciting preflection connected to growth before an experience is to encourage participants to reflect on past successes and accomplishments. This reflection helps them identify instances where they have overcome challenges and achieved their goals, which bolsters their confidence and allows them to see the upcoming experience as another opportunity for growth.

During the experience, providers can induce reflection on personal growth by constructing mechanisms for providing regular, timely, and constructive monitoring, and by gathering feedback on effort and progress at the level of mastery and skills development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Also, as providers remind participants that setbacks and failures during an experience are a natural part of the growth process, participants can view challenges as opportunities for learning and development rather than as indicators of personal inadequacy. Finally, providers can invite participants to explicitly evaluate and reflect on their personal growth through assessments or self-evaluations of performance, goal congruence, or mastery of specific skill sets to create metacognitive awareness that makes personal growth more consciously accessible, more measurable, and more strongly associated with the experience (Mezirow, 1991; Schraw & Dennison, 1994).

Application

In practice, a designer would carefully select a few of the strategies reviewed in the previous sections to incorporate into a single experience. We would recommend reviewing Table 3 and carefully identifying one strategy to implement in the design of all three phases of the experience (i.e., before, during, and after). The designer should also decide whether to cluster those strategies around one source of meaning or spread them across multiple sources. This decision would be dependent on the experience in question and the participants associated with the experience. For example, if a targeted outcome of an experience was to build a sense of community among a group of travelers who did not know each other to begin with, it would be advisable to employ social connection strategies across all experience phases.

Conclusion

Tourism and leisure are often thought to be meaningful for people. In turn, meaning is a key driver of multiple indicators of healthy psychological functioning, including life satisfaction, positive self-image, happiness, psychological maturity, and personal growth (Steger, 2012, 2017). Therefore, beyond simply exerting that tourism and leisure are meaningful, it is important to establish exactly *how* meaning is derived from them. Tourism and leisure experiences are often memorable, and our theoretical and empirical understanding of what makes these experiences memorable has been substantially increased over the past years (Bastiaansen, 2022; Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Duerden et al., 2018, 2023). However, what makes tourism and leisure experiences meaningful has been less convincingly conceptualized, making it difficult for providers of these experiences to develop strategies aimed at designing meaningful experiences. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to provide a sound conceptual basis for understanding what makes experiences meaningful, and second, to connect this conceptual basis to a series of experience design principles, or strategies, aimed at creating meaningful tourism and leisure experiences.

In a previous conceptualization of extraordinary experiences, Duerden and colleagues identified three types of extraordinary experiences or experience impacts (Duerden et al., 2018, 2023; Rossman & Duerden, 2019). In this hierarchical experience typology, experiences are thought to be memorable when they involve strong emotions: a subset of these memorable experiences become meaningful when they yield personally relevant insights, and a subset of those meaningful experiences become transformative when they lead to changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behavior. However, this typology seems to be conceptually underdeveloped concerning the notion of both meaningful and transformative experiences. Specifically, regarding the concept of meaningful experiences, in our view insights are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for experiences to be meaningful. In this paper, we connect the notion of meaningful tourism and leisure experiences to the existing, domain-general psychological literature on meaning in life. We distinguish between aspects of meaning (purpose, coherence, and significance) and sources from which meaning is (experientially) derived: social connection, goal fulfillment, contribution, and growth.

We then argue that experiences become meaningful through a *process* of reflection on those experiences. If this reflection involves the *experiential* quality of yielding new insights that connect with one or several of the four identified sources of meaning, the experience then becomes meaningful. It follows that, in designing for a meaningful experience, it is important to develop strategies that promote reflection on the experience. This reflection can be general or specifically directed to one of the four sources of meaning. The experience design principles that we develop for promoting the different types of reflection are well grounded in our conceptualization of a meaningful experience and, at the same time, are sufficiently concrete and practical to serve as guidance for experience providers in the domains of tourism and leisure as they create meaningful experiences.

Although we took care to develop a conceptual framework for meaningful experiences that is well grounded in established psychological literature on meaning and meaning in life, the extent to which each of the design principles we identify for creating meaningful experiences leads to experiences being perceived as more meaningful is an empirical question. Therefore, the conceptual work presented here also constitutes an empirical agenda (see Table 3) where the merits of the different design principles must be evaluated and established unequivocally. Such research will require both further development of tools to measure meaningful experiences and longitudinal research designs that can uniquely account for the proposed temporal progression of extraordinary experiences. For example, studies that consider how different levels of preflection during the anticipation phase, and how reflection during the participation and reflection phases of experiences influence long-term outcomes, would help identify the sweet spot between not enough and too much structured reflection of an experience. Additionally, the effectiveness of different strategies across contexts and participant types also deserves consideration. While this paper offers a generalized treatment of meaningful experiences, future empirical work will need to intentionally delimit itself to specific strategies, contexts, and participants, in order to begin to build a body of research-backed best practices.

Although most of life's experiential episodes are not extraordinary, research suggests that extraordinary experiences have an outsized impact on a variety of important outcomes. Further conceptual and empirical work on meaningful experiences can help guide both research and practice focused on extraordinary experiences that can prove useful to both academics and professionals. This work could include research on the effectiveness of the design strategies we proposed here, as we hope this paper provides insights that inform future experience design research and practice.

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ORCID iD

Marcel Bastiaanse https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2865-7859

Mat D. Duerden https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7105-5135

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Author Biographies

Marcel Bastiaansen is a Professor of Leisure and Tourism Experience at Breda University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands and a Professor of Cognitive Neuropsychology of the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Tilburg University, Netherlands.

Mat D. Duerden is a Professor of Experience Design and Management in the Marriott School of Business at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA.